

## On the question: what does “to enlighten” mean?

The words “enlightenment,” “culture,” “education” are still newcomers to our language. At the present time they belong merely to the language of books. The common masses scarcely understand them. Should this be a proof that the theme is also novel to us? I do not believe so. One says of a certain people that they do not have a definite word for virtue or for superstition, although one may correctly ascribe a considerable measure of both to them.

Linguistic usage, meanwhile, appears to want to make a distinction among these words which have similar meanings, but it has not yet had time to establish their borders. Education, culture, and enlightenment are modifications of social life, effects of the hard work and efforts of human beings to improve their social condition.

The more that art and hard work have brought the social condition of a people into harmony with the vocation of a human being, the more educated this people is.

Education breaks down into culture and enlightenment. The former seems to apply more to the practical dimension, that means – objectively – to excellence, finesse, and beauty in trades, arts, and society’s mores, and – subjectively – to proficiency, hard work, and skill at those trades, arts, and mores as well as to inclinations, drives, and habits making up that proficiency, hard work, and skill. The more these dimensions within a people correspond to the vocation of a human being, the more culture is ascribed to it, just as a plot of land is said to be cultivated and cared for, to the degree that people’s hard work has put it into the position of producing things useful to human beings. – Enlightenment seems, by contrast, to refer more to the theoretical dimension. It seems

to refer – objectively – to rational knowledge and – subjectively – to proficiency at rationally reflecting upon things of human life, in terms of their importance and influence on the vocation of the human being.

I always set up the vocation of a human being as the measure and goal of every striving and effort, as the point at which we must direct our eyes, if we do not want to lose our way.

A language attains enlightenment through sciences and culture through social interaction, poetry, and oratory. Through the former, it becomes more fit for theoretical use; through the latter for practical use. Both together make a language educated.

Culture in an external sense is called “refinement.” Hail to the nation whose refinement is the effect of culture and enlightenment, whose external splendor and elegance is based upon an internal, solid genuineness.

Enlightenment is related to culture as, generally, theory is related to practice, knowledge to ethics, criticism to virtuosity. Considered in and for itself (objectively), they are connected with one another in the most precise manner, although they can very often be separated subjectively.

One can say: the Nurembergers have more culture, the Berliners more enlightenment, the French more culture, the English more enlightenment, the Chinese much culture and little enlightenment. The Greeks had both culture and enlightenment. They were an educated nation just as their language is an educated language. – Generally, the language of a people is the best indication of its education, of its culture as well as its enlightenment, in terms of both its extent and its strength.

The vocation of a human being can be further divided into, first, the vocation of a human being as a human being and, second, the vocation of a human being as a citizen.

In regard to culture, these considerations collapse into one another since all practical perfections have value merely in relation to the life of society. Hence, they must correspond solely and singularly to a human being’s vocation as a member of society. The human being as a human being is not in need of a culture, but is in need of enlightenment.

Standing and profession in civil life determine each individual member’s duties and rights, and they demand different skills and proficiency, different inclinations, drives, and habits, a different social sense, culture, and refinement, all in accordance with those duties and rights. The more these requirements of individuals harmonize in all

classes with their profession, that is, with their respective vocations as members of the society, the more culture the nation has.

But they also demand of each individual, in keeping with his standing and profession, different theoretical insights and a different proficiency at attaining this, a different degree of enlightenment. The enlightenment that interests the human being as a human being is universal, devoid of any class distinction; the enlightenment of the human being, considered as a citizen, is modified, based upon standing and profession. Here the vocation of the human being again sets the measure and goal of his striving.

Given all this, the enlightenment of a nation is proportional to:

- first, the degree of knowledge,
- second, its importance, that is, its relation to the vocation of (a) the  
human being and (b) the citizen,
- third, its dissemination through all classes, and
- fourth, the standards of their professions.

The level of enlightenment of a people should, therefore, be determined according to a proportion composed of at least four variables, some of which are in turn themselves proportions composed of simpler variables.

The enlightenment of human beings can come into conflict with the enlightenment of citizens. Certain truths which are useful to the human being as a human being, can at times be harmful to him as a citizen. In this regard, the following should be considered. The collision can arise between, first, essential or, second, contingent vocations of the human being, and third, essential or, fourth, extra-essential, contingent vocations of the citizen.

Without their essential vocations as human beings, humans sink down to the level of cattle; without extra-essential vocations, a human being is not so fine and splendid a creature. Without human beings' essential vocations as citizens, the state constitution ceases to exist; without extra-essential vocations, it no longer remains the same in some accompanying relations.

Unhappy is the state that must confess that a human being's essential vocation cannot harmonize in it with a citizen's essential vocation, that the enlightenment which is indispensable to humanity cannot extend to all classes in the realm without the constitution being in danger of perishing. Here philosophy remains silent! Necessity may prescribe laws

or, rather, forge chains that are to be laid upon humanity in order to humiliate it and keep it constantly stifled.

But if the extra-essential vocations of the human being come into conflict with the essential or extra-essential vocations of the citizen, then rules must be established, on the basis of which exceptions ought to occur and cases of collision decided.

If human beings' essential vocations have been brought into conflict with their extra-essential vocations, if one is not permitted to disseminate certain useful truths that embellish humanity without thereby in any way tearing down the principles of religion and ethics inherent in human beings, then the virtue-loving man of enlightenment will proceed with caution and discretion, and prefer to indulge prejudice than drive away the truth that is so wound up with that prejudice. This maxim has, to be sure, always been the bulwark of hypocrisy, and we have it to thank for so many centuries of barbarism and superstition. Whenever one tried to grab hold of the crime, it escaped into the sanctuary. But in spite of this, the friend of humanity himself will have to have recourse to this consideration in the most enlightened times. It is difficult but not impossible, even here, to find the borderline that separates use from misuse.

The nobler a thing's perfection, says a Hebrew writer, the ghastlier is its decomposition.<sup>1</sup> A rotted tree is not as hideous as a decomposed flower, the latter not as repugnant as a putrefied animal, and the latter not as ghastly as a decomposing human being. So, too, with culture and enlightenment. The nobler they are in their blossoming, the more abominable they are when they deteriorate and decompose.

Misuse of enlightenment enfeebles moral feeling and leads to hard-heartedness, egoism, irreligion, and anarchy. Misuse of culture engenders lasciviousness, hypocrisy, flaccidity, superstition, and slavery.

Where enlightenment and culture proceed at the same tempo, they are together the best means of defense against corruption. To ruin the likes of one of them is to be in direct conflict with the other.

Hence, the education of a nation, which, given the earlier definition of the words, is composed of culture and enlightenment, will be far less subject to corruption.

<sup>1</sup> In his edition of the essay, Alexander Altmann suggests that Mendelssohn is referring to *Mischna Judajim*, IV. 6 (*Kleinere Schriften*, [Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1981], p. 240).

An educated nation knows in itself no danger other than excess of national prosperity which, in and of itself, like the most perfect health of the human body, can already be called a sickness. A nation which has come through education to the highest pinnacle of national prosperity is, precisely because of that, in danger of falling since it can climb no higher. — Yet this leads us too far from the question before us!